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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: UNHCR READOUT OF GIA LAI VISIT

Refs: A. Hanoi 2055 and previous; B. Phnom Penh 1439

Summary

1. (SBU) A UNHCR team visited two villages in Gia Lai Province August 23-25 to assess conditions in these locations and to interview returnees. They reported that conditions are generally fair and noted that there were no signs of systematic intimidation by local authorities. The UNHCR officials further observed that the GVN seems to be making an effort to improve conditions for returnees. From local observations they conclude that there are significant social and economic costs for people "misled into crossing the border." Taking these considerations together, the UNCHR team said there may be justification for taking a more skeptical approach when reviewing refugee petitions. UNHCR also expressed concern at a growing number of cases reported from Dak Lak Province and have requested a visit to the area. The number of "refuseniks" remaining in Cambodia is down to six persons but this group seems intent on creating a "political crisis" by forcing their involuntary repatriation. The team also reported that they investigated possible micro-projects in the Central Highlands and concluded that water projects are unnecessary. UNHCR will instead focus on health, education and vocational training projects. End Summary.

Conditions in Gia Lai Province

2. (SBU) On August 26, Hasim Utkan, UNHCR Regional Representative for Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, Assistant Regional Representative for Operations Bernard Quah and UNHCR Vietnam Chief of Mission Vu Anh Son provided a summary of their August 23-25 visit to Gia Lai Province to Pol/C and PolOff and separately to the Hanoi diplomatic community. After meetings in Pleiku with the Provincial People's Committee, the UNHCR team visited Doc Co and Krong Pa Districts to assess the conditions in these locations and to interview returnees. The UNHCR officials made the following observations:

-- Local authorities were open and helpful in guiding the team to requested locations and in arranging interviews with returnees. Although the interviews were monitored, the UNHCR team did not feel that the people interviewed were afraid to speak candidly with them. (Note: The team had requested private interviews, but this request was declined. End Note.) In general, the UNHCR representatives viewed the relationship between returnees and local authorities as more relaxed than on their previous visit and noted that there were no signs of systematic intimidation of returnees.

-- Doc Co District in Gia Lai's southwest is readily accessible by secondary paved roads. It is situated only 30 km from the border in a well-cultivated region with extensive rubber plantations. Formal border posts were established in the area six months ago. The estimated cost for residents of this area to cross the border illegally is 200,000-250,000 Dong (about USD 17).

-- In Doc Co, the UNHCR team met with a family that had reportedly been beaten upon their return to Vietnam, but saw no evidence of physical abuse. The family categorically denied mistreatment. They claimed they were misled into leaving Vietnam and were glad to be back, but refused to say who had misled them. Their chief complaint was that that they no longer held any land, as one member of the family who remained behind had sold the family plot. The Chairman of the village People's Committee told the UNHCR officials that this family would have land allocated in the next distribution.

-- Krong Pa District, in Gia Lai's southeast, is more remote and very difficult to reach by motor vehicle. (Note: The UNHCR team members were unable to ford the last river before reaching their target village, but the local authorities accompanying them were able to invite the returnees down to meet with the team. End Note.) The estimated cost for residents of this area to cross the border illegally is 1.5

million Dong (about USD 100).

-- Outside Krong Pa, the team met with three returnees who also claimed they had been misled into leaving Vietnam by promises of more money and opportunity in Cambodia. One of the three said he immediately petitioned to be returned to Vietnam after seeing the conditions in Cambodia. The other two stated they had been promised the opportunity to make money across the border to buy more cows and had sold their original animals to pay their way. They returned when they found themselves "stuck in the center of Cambodia with no cows at all." Their chief concern was asking for assistance in regaining their identification cards. The local People's Committee Chairman promised to help them.

UNHCR's Conclusions

13. (SBU) The UNHCR team assessed the conditions for returnees in Gia Lai as generally fair, although the Krong Pa area is poorer than the region around Doc Co. Housing is adequate with good electricity and water resources. Local authorities have assisted returnees with allotments of kerosene, rice and salt. According to UNHCR, returnee concerns are raised in open and frank discussions with local authorities, and the authorities are responsive to their concerns. The UNHCR representatives also noted:

-- There are specific instructions from the GVN that appear to have filtered down to authorities at all levels in the region to treat returnees no differently than other citizens of Vietnam. Local leaders seem to obey these instructions and also seem well informed about individual returnees and their conditions.

-- People in the area are "gullible because they are not well-educated" and are therefore easily misled by stories and rumors of better lives elsewhere. However, only a handful of people in Gia Lai have left their respective communities, and they do not seem to have consistent reasons for doing so.

-- There are significant social and economic costs for people crossing the border that are now causing people to think twice about leaving. This realization may well prove decisive in reducing the refugee problem from the Central Highlands, the UNHCR representatives assessed.

14. (SBU) The UNHCR team concluded from the trip that the GVN is making an effort to improve conditions for returnees in the Central Highlands and that UNHCR may be justified in taking a more skeptical approach when reviewing refugee petitions in Cambodia. The team called for more foreign missions to travel to the region to help verify and report their findings there. They also noted with pleasure that Vietnam's MFA is now actively requesting and supporting such visits.

Dak Lak Province

15. (SBU) On a more negative note, the UNHCR team expressed concern at the rising number of cases reported from Dak Lak Province. Of 30 recent Vietnamese ethnic minority arrivals in Cambodia, 24 reportedly came from Dak Lak. UNHCR has requested permission to visit the area in the near future to investigate this phenomenon.

Refuseniks

16. (SBU) The UNHCR team also reported that the number of "refuseniks" in Phnom Penh (those ethnic minority Vietnamese who are eligible for but do not accept resettlement) has now dropped to only six persons from the original 350 (Ref B). However, despite this success in reducing the overall numbers, this final group of six refuseniks seems intent on creating a "political crisis" over their status by forcing their involuntary repatriation and will not accept any proposed solution. UNHCR is now seeking alternatives to avoid this, but could not offer any concrete ideas in this regard.

Micro-projects

17. (SBU) In addition to assessing local conditions, the UNHCR team used their visit to investigate possible micro-projects, which UNHCR committed itself to seek funding for under the Vietnam-Cambodia-UNHCR Tripartite Memorandum of Understanding. Up until their visit, they had considered establishing projects in four sectors: water, health, education and vocational training. However, they have concluded that water projects are unnecessary given the adequate supplies in the region and will now focus on the other three sectors.

Comment

18. (SBU) Based on UNHCR's two trips to Gia Lai Province, it appears that the returnees are no worse for wear and that the GVN has taken steps to facilitate their reintegration. This is a positive development that should be encouraged to continue, and UNHCR and others will undertake further monitoring missions to the region to assess progress. For our part, the Embassy and ConGen HCMC will send a team to Gia Lai September 6-9 and will debrief UNHCR and interested embassies. End Comment.

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